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14. ABSTRACT Pheochromocytomas (PCC) are catecholamine-producing neuroendocrine tumors. Up to 30% give rise to metastases, for which there is no effective treatment. Because there are no human PCC cell lines, this project uses cultures of mouse pheochromocytoma (MPC) cell lines developed in our laboratory as the principal model for pre-clinical testing of chemotherapeutic drugs and validates the findings with primary cultures of human PCC. In this funding period we: <sup>1</sup> Completed and published the major experiments proposed in our original SOW showing cooperative cytotoxic effects of topoisomerase 1 (TOP1) inhibitors, which block enzymes that protect against DNA damage during transcription, with 5-azacytidine, an inhibitor of DNA methylation that increases transcriptional activity. <sup>2</sup> Showed that several drugs (5-azacytidine, lithium and caffeine) that augment TOP1 inhibitors in targeting MPC cells are ineffective against non-dividing human PCC cells <sup>3</sup> Completed testing of Gamitrinib, a new drug that we previously found to be highly effective in cultures of both human and mouse PCC cells, against MPC xenografts in nude mice and showed initial suppression of tumor growth followed by loss of anti-tumor effect. <sup>4</sup> Tested a new strain of immunodeficient mice called NSG for grafting human PCC cells and concluded that these mice, like previously tested strains, are unlikely to be effective in establishing human PCC xenografts or cell lines. <sup>5</sup> Tested novel approaches for directly deriving human PCC cell lines from primary cultures using protocols designed to maintain or induce stem cell properties and concluded that these are also unlikely to be effective in establishing cell lines. Despite positive results pointing to new possible therapies, there are differences between MPC and human PCC cells in responsiveness to some drugs including 5-azacytidine, and a pressing need for human cell lines remains.					
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## **1. Introduction**

### **Purpose and scope of the research effort.**

Pheochromocytomas (PCC) are catecholamine producing neuroendocrine tumors that arise from chromaffin cells in the adrenal medulla or other parts of the peripheral sympathetic nervous system. Extra-adrenal PCCs are arbitrarily classified as paragangliomas (PGLs). For convenience, the two are often referred to collectively as PCC/PGL. These tumors occur sporadically or in hereditary form and are associated with mutations of at least 19 genes. Between 10% and 30% of PCC/PGL give rise to metastases, for which there is currently no effective treatment. Metastasis is particularly likely when tumors harbor mutations of the *SDHB* gene. A major deficiency in current treatment strategies is that they do not account for the fact that, in contrast to many other types of malignant tumor, metastatic PCC/PGLs usually grow very slowly and most of the cells are quiescent at any given time. Mitotic counts and expression of cell cycle markers both in primary tumors and in their metastases are often very low. Treatments that target replicating tumor cells or tumor angiogenesis have therefore met with only limited success. Patients with metastases often die from complications of catecholamine hypersecretion, or from invasive and expansile tumor growth that occur over many years. The need to improve treatment of metastatic PCC/PGLs requires new strategies and a valid experimental model for pre-clinical testing of those strategies. Development of a model has itself been hampered by failure to establish any human cell lines from the tumors for cell culture or xenograft studies, despite many efforts to establish them and several initially promising reports.

This project aims both to develop treatment paradigms targeting quiescent and replicating tumor cells in PCC/PGL metastases using existing models generated in the PI's laboratory, and to develop new models. Specific Aim 1 uses a mouse pheochromocytoma cell line (MPC) *in vitro* as a model to test new approaches to enhance the effectiveness of chemotherapeutic agents by optimizing the combination and timing of their use. Aim 2 uses primary cultures of human PCC/PGL cells derived from individual patient's tumors with diverse genetic backgrounds to validate the findings in Aim 1, and Aim 3 tests the ability of drug-administration paradigms developed in specific aims 1 and 2 to kill disseminated PCC *in vivo* using MPC cells as a model in nude mice. Aim 4 tests novel approaches to develop cell lines of human PCC/PGL for cell culture and xenografts, thereby providing a foundation for future studies. Because the tumors are rare, an important aspect of the project is collaboration with other investigators in order to maximize access to human tumors and to new drugs. Progress in this third funding period builds on results from the first two years and the goals stated in the respective progress reports.

## **2. Key Words**

Pheochromocytoma, paraganglioma, cell culture, cell line, xenograft, nude mouse, chemotherapy, pre-clinical testing, camptothecin, 5-azacytidine, irinotecan, topoisomerase-1, bioluminescence, imaging, Gamitrinib

### 3. Overall Project Summary During the Third Year (15 August 2013- 14 September 2014).

Progress in this third funding period builds on results from the first two years and reflects the goals stated in Section III of the second year progress report. Those stated goals for the third year are repeated below in italics. The actual tasks performed in the third year are enumerated below each goal.

*Goal 1.* Marshall 1 paper submitted but not accepted as of September 2013, through the review process to publication. The studies that were the subject of this paper tested our hypothesis that enhanced cytotoxic efficacy is achieved by combining 5-azacytidine, which increases transcriptional activity, with TOP1 inhibitors, which block enzymes that protect against DNA damage during transcription.

Task 1. Designed new experiments pertaining to testing of the original hypothesis

Task 2 Performed additional experiments requested by reviewers to determine the effect of 5-azacytidine on the bioluminescent reporter used to assess cell proliferation

Task 3 Submitted the paper 3 times before acceptance.

Results.

Our paper, which reports cell culture cytotoxicity studies of topoisomerase 1 (TOP1) inhibitors and 5-azacytidine against human and mouse pheochromocytoma (specific aims 1 and 2) was published in PLOS1

Powers JF, Korgaonkar PG, Flidner S, Giubellino A, Sahagian KP, **Tischler AS**. Cytocidal Activities of Topoisomerase 1 Inhibitors and 5-Azacytidine against Pheochromocytoma/Paraganglioma Cells in Primary Human Tumor Cultures and Mouse Cell Lines. PloS one. 2014;9(2):e87807. Epub 2014/02/12. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0087807. PubMed PMID: 24516563; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC3917832.

Key findings are:

- Enhanced cytotoxic efficacy is achieved by combining 5-azacytidine with TOP1 inhibitors in dividing cell populations. For optimal timing, the two drugs are initially administered together and 5-azacytidine is then removed.
- 5-azacytidine is not effective against non-dividing cells
- 5-azacytidine demethylates the cytomegalovirus promoter and causes increased luminescence of cells transduced with reporter constructs

expressing luciferase driven by the cytomegalovirus promoter. This is an important finding that dictates caution in the interpretation of bioluminescence imaging studies.

*Goal 2.* Follow up promising results thus far obtained in funding periods 1 and 2

We followed up two particularly promising results from the previous funding periods. The first was that the new drug Gamitrinib was cytotoxic to both non-dividing human pheochromocytoma cells and to dividing mouse pheochromocytoma cells in culture. The second was that systemically non-toxic doses of both lithium and caffeine increased the cytotoxic effects of TOP1 inhibitors against cultured mouse pheochromocytoma cells. We had also tested Gamitrinib in vivo against cultured mouse pheochromocytoma MPC cells in nude mice using one of two protocols published by our collaborators who developed the drug. That protocol, which entailed a cycle of 3 days on followed by 2 days off treatment for 21 days (1) was ineffective. This time we tested a regimen of continuous administration described in the second protocol, which was found with other tumors to be more effective while still causing minimal toxicity(2).

Task 1. Repeat testing toxicity of Gamitrinib against MPC GL-9 cells in nude mice (specific aim 3).

1a. We first propagated sufficient cells to inject 20 mice,  $2 \times 10^6$  cells/mouse (~3 weeks), then waited for discrete tumor masses to form (~4 weeks).

1b. Gamitrinib was then administered daily (10mg/kg i.p. dissolved in 20% cremophor/80% saline) and interval caliper measurements of the tumors were performed.

1c. Tumor tissue was harvested for histologic sections from control and treated animals at termination of the experiment.

Results (Figure 1)

Gamitrinib suppressed tumor growth for 7 days but then ceased to be effective. Tumor growth in treated animals accelerated and caught up with growth in untreated controls. There were no histological differences between treated and control groups.

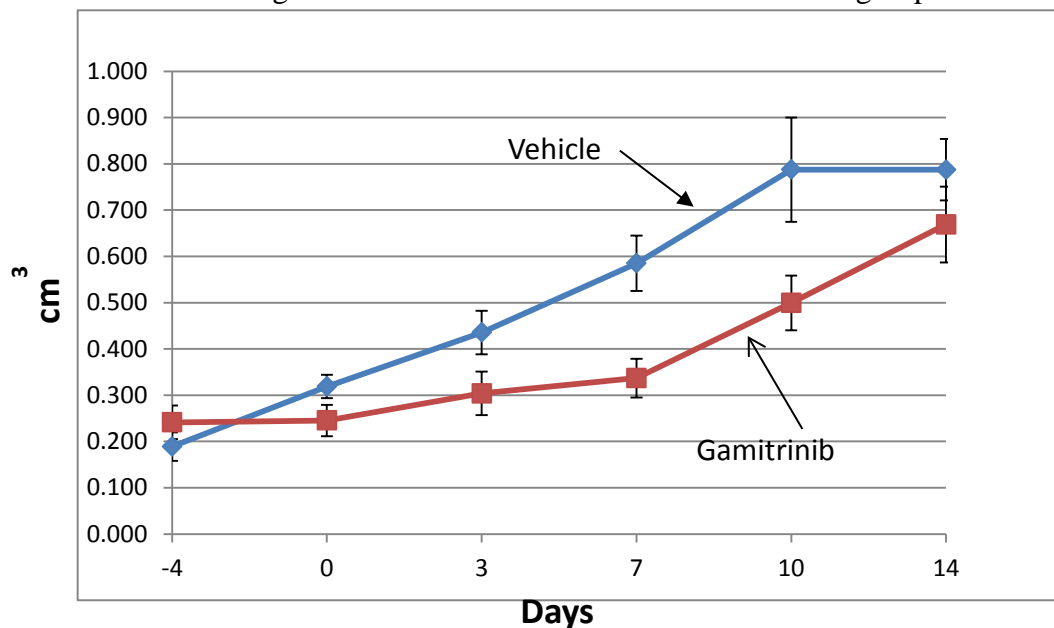


Figure 1. Sequential caliper measurements of subcutaneous MPC GL-9 cells in nude mice before and after start of Gamitrinib treatment (on day 0). The initial anti-tumor effect of the drug disappears by day 14, when tumor size is the same in treated and control animals that received the cremophor/saline vehicle only. n=10 mice per group.

Task 2. Using MPC cells, follow up and continue cell culture testing of non-toxic or minimally toxic drugs including lithium and caffeine as single agents or adjuncts to conventional chemotherapy drugs including TOP1 inhibitors.

Considering the above results and the results from Goal 1, we reviewed all of our previous data on drug responsiveness of the relatively fast-growing mouse-derived MPC cells versus mostly non-dividing human pheochromocytoma cells in order to reassess the usefulness of proceeding with this task using MPC cells as planned. In view of large differences in drug responsiveness between human and mouse pheochromocytoma cells that are most likely attributable to cell proliferation (as in the paper resulting from Goal 1), we decided that it would be a better use of resources to proceed directly to primary cultures of human pheochromocytomas for these studies. See Task 3 below.

Task 3. Test protocols developed with MPC cells against human cells in primary cultures

We tested three non-toxic agents- lithium, caffeine and dichloroacetic acid (3, 4), singly and in combination with SN-38, the active metabolite of the TOP1 inhibitor irinotecan, in cell cultures of human pheochromocytomas.

Results (Figures 2-4)

Lithium, caffeine or dichloroacetic acid individually showed no toxicity against human pheochromocytoma cells and did not enhance the cytotoxic effect of SN38.

Figure 2

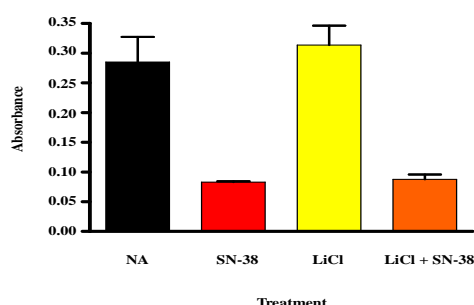


Figure 2

Cytotoxicity of 0.1ug/mL SN-38 against disassociated human pheochromocytoma cells was tested in combination with [5mM] lithium chloride (LiCl) by XTT assay. Cells were cultured in 96 well plate in complete medium and either left untreated (NA) or treated for 1 week with a feeding with additions on day 4. Absorbance is proportional to cell survival. Bars indicate mean +/- SEM of quadruplicate wells.

Figure 3

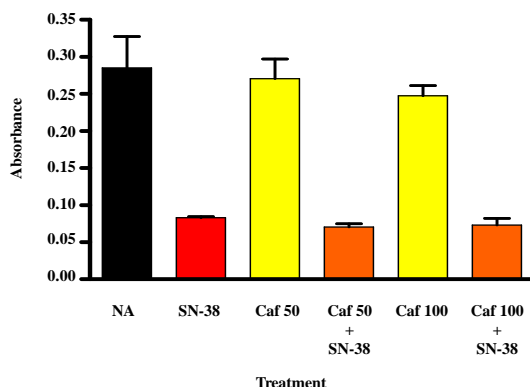


Figure 3

Cytotoxicity of 0.1ug/mL SN-38 against disassociated human pheochromocytoma cells was tested in combination with either [50 uM] or [100 uM] caffeine (Caf) by XTT assay. Cells were cultured in 96 well plate in complete medium and either left untreated (NA) or treated for 1 week with a feeding with additions on day 4. Absorbance is proportional to cell survival. Bars indicate mean  $\pm$  SEM of quadruplicate wells.

Figure 4

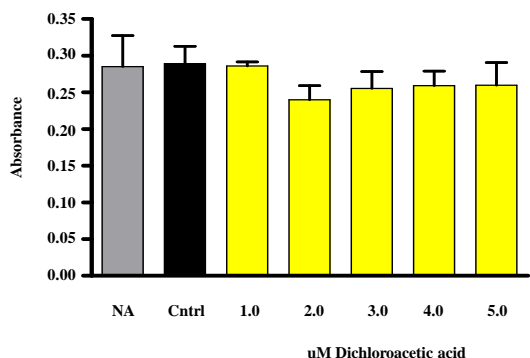


Figure 4

Dose response curve testing the cytotoxicity of dichloroacetic acid against disassociated human pheochromocytoma cells in XTT assay. Cells were cultured in 96 well plate in complete medium and either left untreated (NA), treated with vehicle (Cntrl) or treated with indicated doses of dichloroacetic acid for 1 week with a feeding with additions on day 4. Absorbance is proportional to cell survival. Bars indicate mean  $\pm$  SEM of quadruplicate wells.

*Goal 3.* Continue attempts to develop xenografts of human PCC/PGL.

At the end of the 2012-2013 funding period a number of nude mice that had received xenografts of human PCC or PGL were still alive with no evidence of tumor takes. These mice died or were euthanized by the end of the 2013-2014 period, still with no takes. Early during 2013-2014 funding period a new strain of immunodeficient mice known as Nod SCID Gamma (NSG) became available at our institution. These mice lack B-cells, T-cells and NK-cells, and are generally considered to be superior to nude mice for xenografting. Further, they accept subcutaneous grafts, which are easily observed and measured, as readily as grafts to other locations. We therefore switched to this new strain for our experiments.



Task 1. Necropsies were performed on thirteen mice of several strains (nude, SCID or NOD-SCID) that had been grafted with human PCC/PGL and were alive at the end of the 2012-2013 funding period and either died or were euthanized during the 2013-2014 period.

#### Results

No tumor takes, regardless of mouse strain or tumor genotype

Task 2. In order to compare NSG mice to the strains previously tested, we thawed stored aliquots of viable frozen primary human pheochromocytoma/paragangliomas that had previously been tested and injected them subcutaneously into NSG mice. Three newly acquired tumors were similarly injected into NSG mice, as summarized in Table 1. Mice were monitored for development of masses at the injection site.

#### Results (Table 1)

No tumor takes as of August 2014

<b>Table 1</b>							
<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Tumor Type</b>	<b>Gene</b>	<b>Mouse</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Route</b>	<b>Result</b>
37	F	PGL	Not Tested	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
50	F	PCC	Not Tested	NSG	2	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
13	F	PGL	SDHB	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
54	M	PGL	SDHB+	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
41	M	PGL	Not Tested	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
52	M	PGL	SDHB	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
45	M	PGL	SDHB	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
61	F	PGL	Not Tested	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
29	F	PCC	SDHB	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with	No Tumor

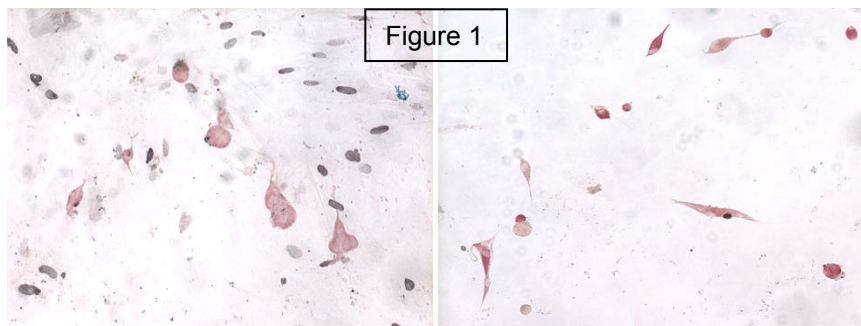
						matrigel)	take
9	F	PGL	SDHB	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
46	F	PCC	SDHB	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor take
53	M	PGL	SDHB	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No tumor take
27	M	PGL	SDHB+	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No tumor take
55	M	PGL-liver metastasis	SDHB	NSG	1	SC-flank (coated with matrigel)	No Tumor Take

*Goal 4.* Continue and expand attempts to establish human PCC/PGL cell lines from primary cultures.

Task 1. Cell cultures were plated from each thawed tumor and each newly acquired tumor that was grafted into mice as listed in Table 1. Dissociated cells were plated routinely in RPMI 1640 medium with 15% fetal bovine serum, which we have previously found optimal for survival of almost all human PCC/PGL. Cultures were kept for up to 1 year or until there were no surviving tumor cells. Cultures were tested for tumor cell proliferation at week 1 or 2 and one year by double immunocytochemical staining for BrdU incorporation and tyrosine hydroxylase (TH) expression as we previously described (5). Staining TH discriminates tumor cells from fibroblasts and other cell types.

Results (Figure 1)

No BrdU incorporation into tumor cells at one week or one year. Proliferation of tumor cells ceases immediately on plating, despite long term cell survival. (Fig 1)



Human PCC culture, 14 days. BrdU-labelling is present in TH-negative fibroblasts but not in TH-positive tumor cells (pink cytoplasm)

Human PCC culture, 1 year, trypsinized and replated. Fibroblasts, have become senescent. Still no labeling in tumor cells.

Task 2. Cultures of representative tumors were tested with BrdU labeling and TH staining as above for proliferative responses to peptide growth factors and small molecules that we previously showed to be mitogenic for normal rat adrenal medullary cells, which are the normal counterpart of pheochromocytoma (6). Agents tested and results with four tumors representing different locations and genotypes are shown in Table 2.

#### Results (Table 2)

No proliferation of tumor cells in response to any mitogen tested

Table 2. BrdU-labelled TH positive cells at 1 week in cultures with the indicated putative mitogens

Tumor type& mutated gene	No Add	NGF 50 ng/mL	bFGF 20 ng/mL	Forskolin 5 $\mu$ M	PMA 50 nM
PGL- <i>SDHC</i>	0	0	0	0	0
PCC- <i>NFI</i>	0	0	0	0	0
PCC- <i>RET</i> (MEN2A)	0	0	0	0	0
PGL-CB-Not tested	0	0	0	0	0

CB= carotid body

Task 3 We tested novel approaches to maintaining proliferation of PCC/PGL cells using protocols that were developed for maintaining stemness of normal neural stem cells, based the presence of recombinant leukemia inhibitory (hrLIF) plus several other growth factors. We tested 2 protocols (7) (8). The studies were performed using frozen freshly dissociated viable cells from three tumors including the last metastatic tumor in Table 2 because that tumor contained an unusually high proportion of proliferating cells *in vivo*, was particularly likely to respond to this approach. Proliferation was assessed as in Tasks 1 and 2.

#### Results Tables (3 and 4)

No proliferation of tumor cells under any condition tested

Table 3. BrdU-labelled TH positive cells at 1 week in cultures with the indicated putative mitogens +/- the histone deacetylase inhibitor valproic acid (VPA) or leukemia inhibiting factor (LIF), which are reported to maintain "stemness". The combination of VPA and Li prevents terminal stem cell differentiation

	No Add	Forskolin 5 $\mu$ M	PMA 50nM	bFGF 20ng/mL	rhNGF 50ng/mL	rhLIF 10ng/mL
No Add	0	0	0	0	0	0
VPA 1mM	0	0	0	0	0	0
VPA 1mM + LiCl 5mM	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 4. BrdU-labelled TH positive cells at 1 week in representative cultures under conditions used to culture neural stem cells.

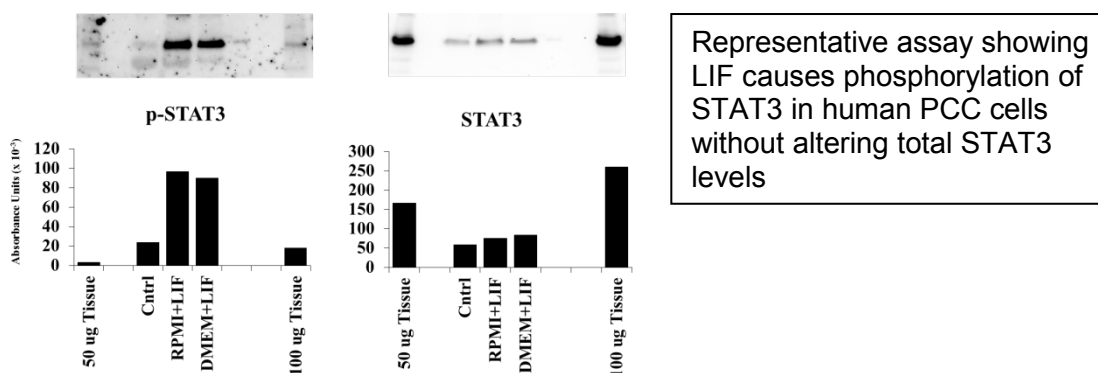
Additions to Basic medium +	10% FBS + 1mM Hydrocortisone	1% BSA + 1mM Hydrocortisone
None	0	0
BME	0	0
LIF 1000 IU/mL	0	0
BMP4 10 ng/mL	0	0
LIF + BMP4	0	0
N2 supplement	0	0
N2 + LIF	0	0
N2 + BMP4	0	0
N2 + LIF +BMP4	0	0
N2 + LIF + Insulin +bFGF +EGF	0	0

Basic Medium= DMEM:F12 (1:1), 0.3g/100 mL D-glucose, 2 mM glutamine, 3 mM sodium bicarbonate, 5ug/mL heparin; BME =beta mercaptoethanol; BMP = bone morphogenetic protein; N2 is a commercial medium supplement for culturing neural cells. FBS= fetal bovine serum; BSA = bovine serum albumen

**Task 4** In order to confirm that human pheochromocytoma cells are actually able to respond to LIF, we extracted and electrophoretically resolved proteins from cultures stimulated with LIF and probed immunoblots for phosphorylation of STAT-3, a downstream readout for activated LIF signaling (9)

Results (Figure 2).

LIF activates STAT-3 signaling in human pheochromocytoma cells, despite the absence of a proliferative response.



**Task 5.** We tested a novel approach to maintaining proliferation of PCC/PGL cells using protocols developed for maintaining stemness of normal neural stem cells based on the

use of a low concentration of the HDAC inhibitor trichostatin A (10, 11). The experiments were performed as for Task 3.

Results (Tables 5 and 6)

No proliferation of tumor cells under any condition tested

Table 5. BrdU-labelled TH positive cells at 1 week in representative human PCC cultures with the indicated putative mitogens +/- the histone deacetylase inhibitor trichostatin A or leukemia inhibiting factor (LIF), which are reported to maintain “stemness”. Hydrocortisone is a survival factor,

Trichostatin A	LIF 1000 IU/mL	Hydrocortisone 1 $\mu$ M	LIF 1000 IU/mL + Hydrocortisone 1 $\mu$ M
0	0	0	0
1 nM	0	0	0
10 nM	0	0	0
100 nM	0	0	0

Table 6. BrdU-labelled TH positive cells at 1 week in representative human PCC cultures with the indicated putative mitogens +/- the histone deacetylase inhibitor trichostatin A (TSA), which are reported to maintain “stemness”

	No Add	Forskolin 5 $\mu$ M	PMA 50nM	bFGF 20ng/mL	rhNGF 50ng/mL	rhLIF 10ng/mL
No Add	0	0	0	0	0	0
TSA 1nM	0	0	0	0	0	0

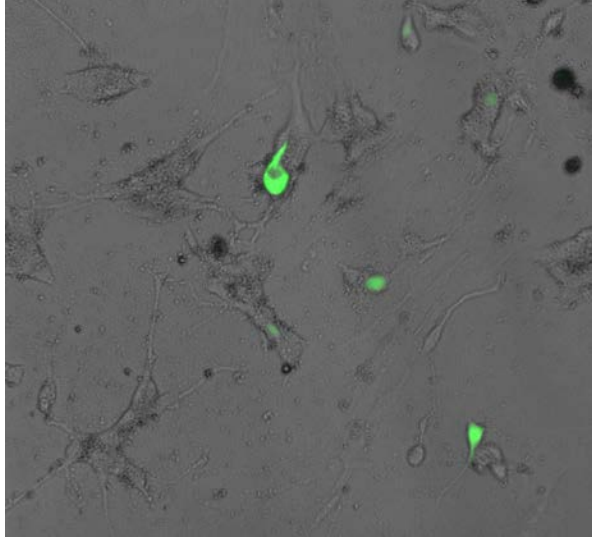
Task 6 We tested a novel approach to forcing growth-arrested PCC/PGL cells to resume proliferation by introducing cyclinD1 + constitutively active CDK4 as described by Kendall et al (12). This approach has been successful with normal somatic human cells but had never been attempted with growth-arrested tumor cells.

Results (Fig 3)

We initially attempted to transduce cultured tumor cells with a cyclinD1 + CDK4R24C construct cloned into a lentivirus vector by our collaborator at Tufts University School of Medicine, Prof. Brent Cochran. However, the construct did not successfully introduce both inserts. We therefore attempted to achieve the same objective using two separate lentivirus constructs. This was not successful because low infectivity of non-dividing PCC/PGL cells prevented us from obtaining double infections. Fibroblasts in the same

cultures apparently were doubly infected and showed increased proliferation compared to fibroblasts in control cultures.

Fig.3. Human pheochromocytoma cells transduced with cdk4 and green fluorescent protein tag. The GFP shows that only occasional cells have been successfully transduced



## Section II - Problem Areas

1. Although our mouse pheochromocytoma cell lines are a valuable model for some types of pre-clinical drug testing, we have shown that this is not true in every case. This is in part attributable to the relatively rapid proliferation of the mouse cells compared to little or no proliferation of human PCC/PGL cells. Tumor genotype and still unidentified species differences probably also play a role. This problem emphasizes a continued need to develop human PCC/PGL cell lines.
2. We have not been able to devise any means to make human PCC/PGL cells proliferate in culture. Even tumor cells that proliferated rapidly in patients *in vivo* immediately ceased proliferating in culture.
3. Xenografts of human PCC/PGL do not take in any strain of mouse tested, regardless of the type of graft (tissue fragments or dissociated cells) or the anatomic site of the graft. Even tumor cells that proliferated rapidly in a patient's hepatic and peritoneal metastases have failed to graft when introduced to the corresponding sites in nude mice. We now believe the ultimate solution to the problem will be finding a way to obtain human cell lines directly from primary cultures.
4. Because human PCC/PGL cells do not replicate in culture, the only way to permanently introduce genes that cause proliferation is by transduction using Lentivirus vectors. Although Lentivirus is known to be able to transduce non-proliferating cells, in

our experience and that of other investigators Lentivirus infection is very inefficient with PCC/PGL cells. We have so far been unable to achieve sufficient amounts of infection.

### **Section III - Description of work to be performed during the next reporting period.**

#### Overview

The next and final period is a no-cost one year extension for which we have very limited residual funds. We plan to focus exclusively on problems associated with thus far failed attempts to establish human PCC/PGL cell lines as summarized in Section II.

*Goal 1.* Continue attempts to test transduction with cyclinD1 + CDK4R24C as a means of driving tumor cell proliferation

Task 1. Test multiple cycles of repeated infection with existing separate cyclinD1 and CDK4R24C Lentivirus constructs as a way to increase infection rate.

Task 2. Reassess possibilities of generating a new double Lentivirus construct.

*Goal 2.* Conduct preliminary tests for possible metabolomic differences between human PCC/PGL tumor tissue, which contains replicating tumor cells, and primary cultures from the same tumors that could account for proliferation arrest in the cultures. These studies will be performed in collaboration with Prof. Brent Cochran at Tufts University School of Medicine.

Task 1. Extract soluble metabolites from representative tumors and corresponding cultures

Task 2. Analyze metabolite profiles by NMR as described by Dettmer et al. (13)

*Goal 3.* Conduct preliminary test of a novel high-throughput method currently used by Dr. Cochran to establish tumor stem cell lines from human glioblastoma multiforme

Task 1. Plate primary cultures of representative human PCC/PGL.

Task 2. Transduce cultures at low multiplicity of infection (m.o.i.) with commercially available modular libraries delivering sh-RNA to knock down expression of > 10,000 individual genes that could affect proliferation, followed by positive selection of proliferating clones (RNAi Screening with Pooled Lentiviral shRNA Libraries, A Chenchik, Celecta, Inc, [www.celecta.com](http://www.celecta.com)). Select any resulting proliferative clones for further study.

*Goal 4.* Conduct preliminary test of co-culture with glioblastoma cells, which can produce “oncometabolites” potentially mitogenic for some human PCC/PGL genotypes.

Task 1. Co-culture representative PCC/PGL and glioblastoma in separate compartments of membrane-divided wells. Test for PCC/PGL cell replication by BrdU labeling and double immunocytochemical staining for BrdU and tyrosine hydroxylase.

## **2. Key Research Accomplishments During the Third Year (15 August 2013-14 September 2014).**

- Completed the major experiments proposed in our original SOW showing cooperative interactions between topoisomerase 1 inhibitors and 5-azacytidine and published the results in a significant journal.
- Completed testing of Gamitrinib, a new type of drug that we previously found to be highly effective in cultures of both human and mouse PCC/PGL cells, against mouse pheochromocytoma xenografts in nude mice. The results were an initial suppression of tumor growth followed by loss of anti-tumor effect
- Showed that several drugs (5-azacytidine, lithium and caffeine) that supplement topoisomerase-1inhibitors in targeting mouse pheochromocytoma cells are ineffective against non-dividing human PCC/PGL cells .
- Tested a new strain of immunodeficient mice called NSG for grafting human PCC/PGL cells and concluded that to these mice, as with previously tested strains, are unlikely to be effective in establishing human PCC/PGL xenografts or cell lines.
- Tested novel approaches for directly deriving human PCC/PGL cell lines from primary cultures using protocols designed to maintain or induce stem cell properties in the cultured tumor cells and concluded that these are also unlikely to be effective in establishing cell lines



#### **4. Appendices** Not applicable

#### **5. Conclusion**

We have used cultures of mouse pheochromocytoma cell lines developed in our laboratory as the principal model for pre-clinical testing of strategies to improve the efficacy of existing chemotherapeutic drugs and for testing potential new drugs that might be used to treat patients with malignant pheochromocytoma. Findings made with the mouse model are secondarily tested against primary cultures of human tumors and then tested *in vivo* with grafts to mice of the mouse cell lines. This approach is necessary because there are no human pheochromocytoma cell lines. Using this approach, we have completed and published most of the cell culture studies for Specific Aims 1 and 2 in the approved SOW and Project Narrative for this grant. . However, there are important differences between the mouse pheochromocytoma cells and their human counterparts, caused in part by the fact that the human cells proliferate very slowly *in vivo* and completely cease proliferating when placed into cell cultures. There remains a pressing need for human cell lines to perform more valid pre-clinical drug testing. In the past three funding periods we have extensively tested potential ways to propagate human pheochromocytoma cells from primary tumors in cultures under conventional and hypoxic conditions and using protocols directed at maintaining or inducing stem cell characteristics of tumor cells. We have also tested xenografts to all currently available strains of immunosuppressed mice. These efforts have been completely unsuccessful, even with cells that grew rapidly in a patient with widely metastatic tumor. The focus in the next funding period will therefore be on testing novel analytical approaches to understanding mechanisms that drive or inhibit human PCC progression. cell lines from primary cultures. These will be based on

#### **6. Publications, Abstracts and Presentations**

##### **Papers**

Powers JF, Korgaonkar PG, Fliedner S, Giubellino A, Sahagian KP, **Tischler AS**. Cytocidal Activities of Topoisomerase 1 Inhibitors and 5-Azacytidine against Pheochromocytoma/Paraganglioma Cells in Primary Human Tumor Cultures and Mouse Cell Lines. PloS one. 2014;9(2):e87807. Epub 2014/02/12. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0087807. PubMed PMID: 24516563; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC3917832.

Mete O, **Tischler AS**, de Krijger R, McNicol AM, Eisenhofer G, Pacak K, et al. Protocol for the examination of specimens from patients with pheochromocytomas and extra-adrenal paragangliomas. Arch Pathol Lab Med. 2014;138(2):182-8. Epub 2014/01/31. doi: 10.5858/arpa.2012-0551-OA. PubMed PMID: 24476517; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC3909881.

##### **Invited Presentations**

**Tischler AS** Thirty-five years of pheochromocytoma models: where do we stand today?  
4<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Pheochromocytoma, Symposium on Pheochromocytoma,  
Kyoto, Japan September 17th - 20th, 2014

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**7. Inventions, Patents and Licenses**      None

**8. Reportable Outcomes**      None

**9. Other Achievements**      Not applicable

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## **11. Appendices**

# Cytocidal Activities of Topoisomerase 1 Inhibitors and 5-Azacytidine against Pheochromocytoma/Paraganglioma Cells in Primary Human Tumor Cultures and Mouse Cell Lines

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## Abstract

There is currently no effective treatment for metastatic pheochromocytomas and paragangliomas. A deficiency in current chemotherapy regimens is that the metastases usually grow very slowly. Drugs that target dividing tumor cells have therefore had limited success. To improve treatment, new strategies and valid experimental models are required for pre-clinical testing. However, development of models has itself been hampered by the absence of human pheochromocytoma/paraganglioma cell lines for cultures or xenografts. Topoisomerase 1 (TOP1) inhibitors are drugs that interfere with mechanisms that maintain DNA integrity during transcription in both quiescent and dividing cells. We used primary cultures of representative human tumors to establish the cytotoxicity of camptothecin, a prototypical TOP1 inhibitor, against non-dividing pheochromocytoma/paraganglioma cells, and then employed a mouse pheochromocytoma model (MPC) to show that efficacy of low concentrations of camptothecin and other TOP1 inhibitors is increased by intermittent coadministration of sub-toxic concentrations of 5-azacytidine, a DNA methylation inhibitor that modulates transcription. We then tested the same drugs against a clonal MPC derivative that expresses CMV reporter-driven luciferase and GFP, intended for in vivo drug testing. Unexpectedly, luciferase expression, bioluminescence and GFP expression were paradoxically increased by both camptothecin and SN38, the active metabolite of irinotecan, thereby masking cell death. Expression of chromogranin A, a marker for neuroendocrine secretory granules, was not increased, indicating that the drug effects on levels of luciferase and GFP are specific to the GFP-luciferase construct rather than generalized cellular responses. Our findings provide proof of principle for use of TOP1 inhibitors against pheochromocytoma/paraganglioma and suggest novel strategies for enhancing efficacy and reducing toxicity by optimizing the combination and timing of their use in conjunction with other drugs. The paradoxical effects of TOP1 inhibitors on luciferase and GFP dictate a need for caution in the use of CMV promoter-regulated constructs for cancer-related imaging studies.

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## Introduction

Pheochromocytomas (PCC) are neuroendocrine tumors that arise from chromaffin cells in the adrenal medulla. Closely related extra-adrenal tumors are arbitrarily classified by the World Health Organization as paragangliomas (PGL) [1]. Up to 30% of PCC/PGL give rise to metastases, for which there is currently no effective treatment [2]. An additional subset of these tumors is surgically unresectable. A major deficiency in current treatment strategies that they do not account for the fact that, in contrast to many other types of malignant tumors, PCC/PGL usually grow very slowly and most of the cells are quiescent at any given time. Mitotic counts and expression of cell cycle markers both in primary tumors and in their metastases are usually very low [3].

Treatments that target replicating tumor cells or tumor angiogenesis have therefore met with only limited success. Patients with metastases or inoperable tumors often die from complications of catecholamine hypersecretion, or from invasive and expansile tumor growth that occurs over many years.

The need to improve treatment of metastatic or unresectable PCC/PGL requires new strategies and a valid experimental model for pre-clinical testing of those strategies. However, development of a model has itself been hampered by failure to establish any human PCC cell lines for cell culture or xenograft studies, despite many efforts to establish them over a period of more than 35 years [4] and several initially promising reports. Factors contributing to these failures are that there are very few dividing cells even in vivo,

as shown by staining for Ki-67 or other markers [3], and that whatever dividing cells are present immediately undergo growth arrest in culture [4]. One recent paper reports the establishment of a putative PCC progenitor line using a TERT construct [5], but the cells appear to bear minimal resemblance to PCC and are also not generally available.

Topoisomerases are enzymes that alleviate topological stresses such as supercoiling that occur when DNA strands are unwound during transcription or replication. The enzymes function by introducing transient single strand (topoisomerase 1, TOP1) or double strand (topoisomerase 2, TOP2) DNA breaks. Inhibition of topoisomerases initiates apoptotic cell death [6,7]. The prototypical TOP1 inhibitor, camptothecin, causes DNA damage both during S-phase and during transcription [8], thereby potentially activating apoptotic pathways in both dividing and non-dividing cells. Further, cytotoxicity of camptothecin on both dividing and non-dividing PCC cells was demonstrated by Greene and colleagues, who first showed in the 1990's that the drug causes apoptotic death of nerve growth factor-treated PC12 cells [9]. We therefore hypothesized that camptothecin and other TOP inhibitors might be effective chemotherapeutic agents for treatment of metastatic PCC/PGL.

Camptothecin is known to be toxic to many kinds of cancer cells, but systemic toxicity and a long time course required for its effect have prevented its general use in chemotherapy. Several camptothecin analogs currently are in use, including topotecan and irinotecan. These have been employed in combination with other agents to treat a variety of aggressive neuroendocrine carcinomas, with mostly modest results in terms of patients' survival [10,11]. However, new TOP1 and TOP2 inhibitors are under development [6,7], as is a particle-bound form of camptothecin that might have reduced toxicity and increased efficacy [12,13], and increasing numbers of publications in recent years attest to growing awareness of the potential value of camptothecin or its analogs as chemotherapeutic agents.

This *in vitro* study was undertaken in preparation for the clinical availability of new camptothecin derivatives, and had two objectives. The first was to test the effectiveness of TOP1 inhibition against pheochromocytoma cells using camptothecin to obtain proof of principle. The second was to develop strategies for enhancing the efficacy and reducing the toxicity of TOP1 inhibitors by optimizing the combination and timing of their use in conjunction with other drugs. Because there are no human PCC/PGL cell lines, we first used primary cultures of representative human tumors to establish the cytotoxicity of camptothecin against non-replicating human PCC/PGL cells. We then used a mouse pheochromocytoma cell line (MPC) as a model to further test camptothecin and other TOP1 inhibitors in conjunction with other drugs. As a prototype for complementary drugs, we used the DNA methyltransferase inhibitor, 5-azacytidine (5-aza), which we hypothesized would potentiate the effect of camptothecin because it is known to increase transcription of multiple genes by causing promoter demethylation. Combinations of existing TOP1 inhibitors with other drugs have previously been tested against other tumors in clinical or experimental settings, with mixed results. These include a strategy for staggered initiation of combined treatment with irinotecan and 5-aza-2'-deoxycytidine reported by Ishiguro et al to be highly effective against a colorectal cancer cell line *in vivo* and in cell culture [14]. Promoter demethylation in response to 5-aza has until recently been considered to be dependent on DNA replication in dividing cell populations. However, increasing evidence indicates that DNA can be demethylated in a process of dynamic remodeling that occurs in both dividing and non-dividing cells [15].

## Materials and Methods

### Ethics Statement

Studies of human tumor samples were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the National Institutes of Health and Tufts Medical Center. Patients provided written informed consent.

### Human Tumor Cultures

Seven human PCCs/PGLs representing different genotypes and locations were enzymatically dissociated and plated in 35 mm culture dishes at a density of ~5000 cells/dish in RPMI 1640 medium with 15% fetal bovine serum. Cultures were maintained for 1–2 weeks before the start of drug testing to allow for firm attachment. During the pre-testing interval, representative dishes were pulsed for at least 5 days with 10  $\mu$ M bromodeoxyuridine (BrdU), which is incorporated into the DNA of proliferating cells, then fixed and double stained for BrdU and tyrosine hydroxylase (TH), a marker of catecholamine-synthesizing ability, to discriminate tumor cells from non-neoplastic fibroblasts and other cell types in primary cultures [16]. At the start of drug testing, camptothecin (Sigma Chemical Co, St Louis, MO) and/or additional drugs were added for the time intervals and at the concentrations indicated in the figure legends. At the end of the experiments cultures were fixed and stained for TH in order to identify surviving tumor cells.

To measure drug-induced cytotoxicity, surviving TH-positive cells were counted in an area of the culture dish defined by a randomly placed 22×22 mm square coverslip.

Protocols for dissociation and culture of PCC/PGL cell cultures were as previously described for similar studies by Powers et al [17]. Cytotoxicity assays were performed without knowledge of tumor genotype or location until final tabulation of the data.

### Mouse Pheochromocytoma Cell Lines

The mouse pheochromocytoma cell line MPC 4/30PRR was developed in our laboratory [18] and previously utilized for testing of other potential chemotherapeutic agents [19]. Cells tested were from passages ~20–25 maintained as described by Powers et al [18]. The less differentiated derivative of MPC 4/30PRR designated MTT (for mouse tumor tissue) established from MPC tumor tissue formed after reinjection of the original cell line into nude mice [20], was maintained as described by Martiniova et al [20]. The MPC and MTT lines are complementary for drug testing purposes in that MTT best reflects aggressive metastases, while MPC is better differentiated and more comparable to slowly growing, hormonally active metastases [21] [22].

We derived an additional cell line designated MPC 4/30/PRR GL-9 (abbreviated to MPC GL-9) expressing copepod green fluorescent protein (copGFP) and firefly luciferase from MPC 4/30PRR by transducing the cells with a pre-packaged lentiviral construct (GreenFire1, SBI Systems) containing both genes under control of the CMV promoter. Infection was performed according to the manufacturer's protocol and MPC GL-9, which stably expresses high levels of luciferase, was cloned from a single transduced cell identified by its GFP fluorescence. Aside from expression of its two marker proteins, MPC GL-9 is similar to its parent tumor. It is intended to be used for *in vivo* bioluminescence imaging of tumor deposits comparably to the recently described MTT derivative known as MTT-luc [23].

## Cytotoxicity Testing and Immunostaining of MPC and MTT Cell Lines

Drug testing regimens were as described in the figure legends. Cytotoxicity against MPC 4/30PRR and MTT cells was tested in parallel using the XTT colorimetric assay to quantitate cell survival (Cell Proliferation Kit II, Roche, Indianapolis IN). Additional XTT assays were performed to compare cytotoxicity against MPC 4/30PRR and MPC GL-9 cells, and a parallel assay using bioluminescence as the reporter was performed on MPC GL-9 cells. The luminescence assay was essentially as described by Giubellino et al [23]. All cytotoxicity experiments with mouse cell lines were performed on 3 occasions unless otherwise specified.

To assess BrdU incorporation into MPC cells, cultures were pulsed with 10  $\mu$ M BrdU for 24 h, then fixed and stained for BrdU and TH by the same method as the primary human cell cultures.

## Effects of Other TOP1 Inhibitors on MPC and Human Pheochromocytoma Cells

In order to determine the cytotoxicity of camptothecin analogs currently in clinical use, we first used MPC in XTT assays to test four drugs: camptothecin, topotecan, irinotecan and SN38, the active metabolite of irinotecan. The concentrations of these drugs were based on published preclinical studies of other cell types [24].

## Assessment of Apoptosis

To test and compare the effects of different combinations of camptothecin and 5-aza on apoptosis, MPC cells were cultured with the two drugs separately or in combination for up to 2 weeks, with a switch in sequence of addition at one week corresponding to the schedule of cytotoxicity testing by XTT assay. Immunoblots were then probed for a 25 kDa fragment of poly (ADP-ribose) polymerase (PARP), that is cleaved from the 116 kDa nuclear enzyme by activated caspase 3 and serves as an apoptosis marker [25]. To confirm the morphological changes of apoptosis, fixed cultures were stained with 4'-6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI, 0.5  $\mu$ M) (Abbot Molecular, Abbott Park IL) and examined by fluorescence microscopy.

## Immunoblots

Protocols for protein extraction and immunoblotting were as previously described [17]. Cleaved PARP was detected with a rabbit monoclonal antibody from Epitomics Inc, (Burlingame, CA, USA). Firefly luciferase protein was detected with mouse monoclonal antibody Luci 1-107 from Abcam (ab7358, 1:1000), copepod GFP was detected with TurboGFP polyclonal rabbit antibody PA5-22688 from Thermo Scientific Pierce, and chromogranin A was detected with a polyclonal rabbit antibody provided by Dr. Reiner Fischer-Colbrie, Innsbruck, Austria.

## Statistics

Statistical significance of drug effects on survival of human PCC/PGL cells studied by immunocytochemistry on MPC cells in XTT assays was analyzed by one-way ANOVA. Statistics for luminescence imaging analyses are as described by Tao et al [26].

## Results

### Cell Culture Studies

**Primary human tumor cell cultures.** Progressive, dose-dependent killing of human PCC/PGL cells was observed in cultures maintained for up to 2 weeks in the presence of camptothecin *versus* control medium. At two weeks, mean survival

was approximately 13% with 10  $\mu$ M camptothecin and 38% with 1  $\mu$ M (Table 1 and Fig. 1). Cytotoxicity was independent of tumor genotype or location in this series. Staining of additional control cultures for BrdU and TH showed no BrdU incorporation into TH-positive cells and robust incorporation into TH-negative cells in the pre-testing period. This finding was consistent with our previous observations that human PCC/PGL do not proliferate in primary cultures [4], and indicated that the effect of camptothecin on human PCC/PGL cells does not require DNA replication.

The proportion of TH-negative contaminating cell types in control cultures was estimated at <10% to >80%, reflecting the composition and varying ease of dissociation of individual tumors. Cytotoxicity of camptothecin against TH-positive tumor cells was not obviously affected by the relative presence or absence of other cell types. However, bystander toxicity on TH-negative cells was evident, particularly in cultures with 10  $\mu$ M camptothecin, indicating a need for strategies to reduce the effective camptothecin dose.

### MPC versus MTT Cells

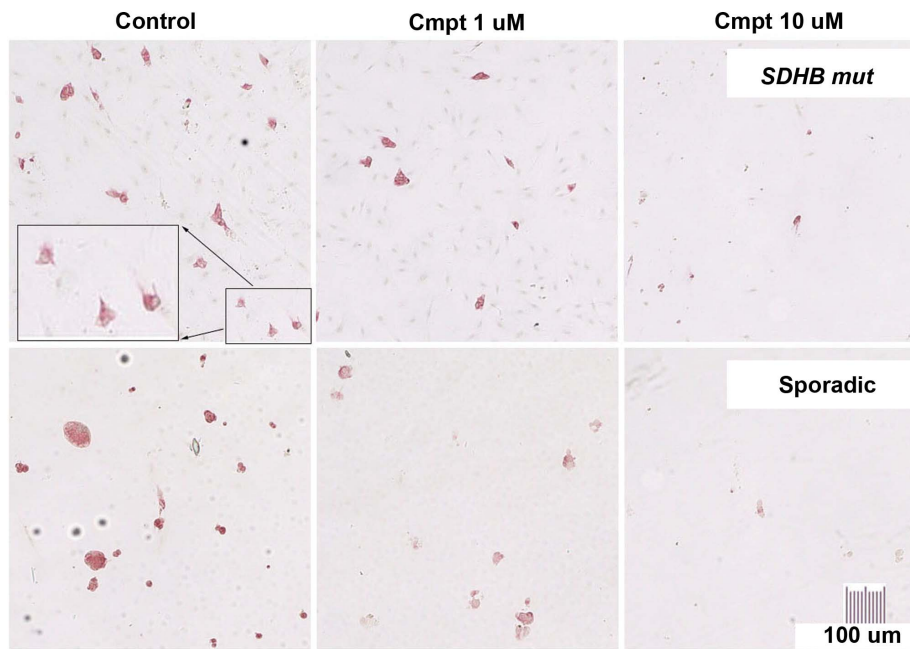
Initial comparisons of the MPC and MTT cell lines showed that both lines were more sensitive to camptothecin than their human counterparts, with MTT showing a lower threshold of response than MPC (Fig. 2). Both cell lines showed approximately 20% survival in the presence of 1  $\mu$ M camptothecin at 7 days and no survival at 7 days in the presence of 10  $\mu$ M camptothecin. Because the responsiveness of MPC more closely resembled that of human pheochromocytomas, MPC was used as the focus for subsequent studies.

### Responses to Camptothecin and 5-azacytidine

To test the interaction of camptothecin with 5-aza, cytotoxicity assays with MPC cells were performed over a 2-week period with camptothecin present continuously and 5-aza added during either the first or second week (Fig. 3). Two concentrations of camptothecin (0.5  $\mu$ M and 1  $\mu$ M) and a single (1  $\mu$ M) concentration of 5-aza were tested. Mean survival at two weeks was significantly decreased in cultures treated with 5-aza plus camptothecin compared to either concentration of camptothecin alone. However, cooperativity was optimal during the first week of culture and was reduced when 5-aza was present only for the second week. Further, when 5-aza was removed after one week from cultures initially receiving camptothecin plus 5-aza, survival was equivalent to that in cultures containing both drugs for the entire 2 weeks (Fig. 3). A small decrease in survival seen with 5-aza alone was cumulative over the two week period and significant at 2 weeks (Fig. 3). In contrast to human primary cultures, MPC cells from passage numbers used in this study showed approximately 30% BrdU labeling/24 hrs at the onset of cytotoxicity testing (not shown).

Immunoblots for the cleaved p25 PARP fragment showed a marked increase within 24 hrs in apoptosis caused by the combination of camptothecin and 5-aza, with little or no effect of 5-aza alone (Fig. 4). This pattern of cooperativity was still evident after 4 days (Fig. 4). However, it was no longer detectable at day 7, when the intensity of the PARP band was increased in cultures with 5-aza alone. Consistent with this finding, fluorescence microscopy at day 7 showed many cells with nuclei in final stages of apoptotic death [27] in cultures with camptothecin alone or camptothecin plus 5-aza, and a few similar cells were seen in cultures with 5-aza alone. (Fig. 5).

With MPC GL-9, the results of cytotoxicity testing by XTT assay were comparable to those with the parent tumor. However, in the parallel bioluminescence assays a paradoxical increase in



**Figure 1. Killing of cells from *SDHB*-mutated and apparently sporadic human PCC/PGL s by camptothecin.** Dissociated human tumor cells in primary cultures maintained with 0 (control), 1 or 10  $\mu$ M camptothecin (Cmpt) for 2 wks, then fixed and stained for TH (red cytoplasm) to discriminate the tumor cells from other cell types. At 10  $\mu$ M, camptothecin eliminated almost all background cells (faintly visible as hematoxylin-counterstained blue nuclei in top row control and 1  $\mu$ M panels) and was therefore considered too toxic for the purposes of this investigation. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.g001

luminescence above control levels was caused by camptothecin despite the presence of drug-induced apoptosis and cell death. A comparably large increase was not detectable in the presence of 5-aza alone (Fig. 6A). However, cultures with 5-aza alone maintained a constant level of luminescence in the presence of decreased cell numbers shown by XTT assay, consistent with a

smaller luminescence increase. Immunoblotting for luciferase protein supported this interpretation, showing increased band intensities in camptothecin-treated cells and also a small increase in cells treated with 5-aza (Fig. 6B). Parallel increases were seen in GFP bands, while chromogranin A bands in the same immunoblot decreased in response to camptothecin and showed no effect of 5-aza. Because CgA is a marker for neuroendocrine secretory granules, this finding indicates that the drug effects on levels of luciferase and GFP are specific to the GFP-luciferase construct rather than increased granule content or other generalized cellular responses.

**Table 1. Cytotoxicity of camptothecin against human PCC/PGL cells in primary cultures.**

Tumor	Genotype	Surviving Cells/Dish	
		(% of Control)	
		1.0 $\mu$ M Cmpt	10 $\mu$ M Cmpt
1 PCC	VHL	39.1	18.6
2 PCC	Sporadic-Neg	63.3	29.1
3 PCC	Sporadic -Neg	18.6	4.7
4 PCC	Unknown NT	45.7	
5 PGL	SDHB	33.1	2.2
6 PGL	SDHB	71.7	
7** PGL	SDHB	24.0**	10.1

Dissociated primary tumor cells from PCCs or PGLs representing different genotypes were cultured in the presence of 1  $\mu$ M or 10  $\mu$ M camptothecin compared to control medium. Counts were derived by counting all stained cells defined by a randomly placed square coverslip in a 35 mm culture dish (see Figure 1). All counts were done at 2 weeks except for tumor 7 (\*\*), which was counted at 1 week because of extensive cell death caused by particular sensitivity to camptothecin. The two tumors listed as sporadic negative were tested negative for *MEN2* *RET* mutation and for *SDHB*, *SDHC* and *SDHD* mutations and deletions.

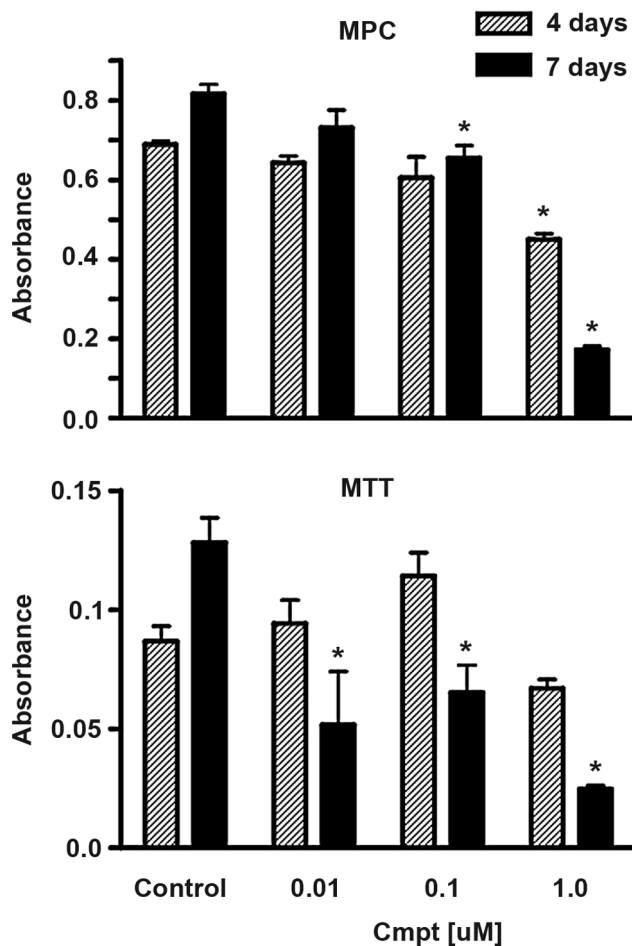
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.t001

### Responses to other TOP1 Inhibitors

Because native camptothecin is considered too toxic for clinical use, we tested three additional TOP1 inhibitors; topotecan, irinotecan and SN38, the active metabolite of irinotecan, against MPC cells for up to 2 weeks using the same methods as for camptothecin. The concentration ranges tested (0.1–10 ng/mL for topotecan, 1–100 ng/mL for SN38, 0.1–10  $\mu$ M for irinotecan) were chosen to match published *in vitro* tests of these drugs against other tumors [24]. The relatively high concentration of irinotecan required in cell cultures reflects the fact that the enzyme required for *in vivo* metabolic activation is not present. On a molar basis the most potent drug was SN38, which was approximately 10 times as potent as camptothecin, with 100 ng/mL SN38 (0.26  $\mu$ M) or 1  $\mu$ M camptothecin (2.7  $\mu$ M) each causing ~90% cell death (Fig. 7). Irinotecan was less potent as expected but did show some effect, suggesting that some conversion to SN38 might take place in the cultures.

Following the above result, we tested SN38 in a XTT assay against one representative human pheochromocytoma for which a sufficient number of highly purified tumor cells could be obtained by multiple rounds of plating and differential detachment prior to testing. The human cell population tested in the XTT assay was



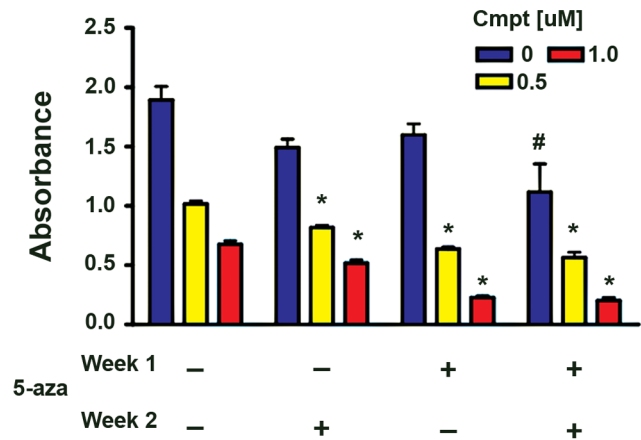


**Figure 2. Comparative cytotoxicity of camptothecin against MPC and MTT cells.** Parallel tests of camptothecin toxicity on MPC and MTT cell lines at two time points, demonstrate greater sensitivity of the more aggressive MTT line to low camptothecin concentrations. Data are from a representative experiment that was repeated on 2 independent occasions. Bars indicate mean  $\pm$  SEM of quadruplicate wells. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.g002

confirmed to consist of >90% TH-positive cells by immunohistochemical staining of an additional culture. As shown in Fig. 8, SN38 killed human PCC cells similarly to camptothecin, although both drugs were less effective against human PCC than against MPC cells. A set of immunohistochemically stained cultures of the same tumor tested for 2 weeks with SN-38 as described for the camptothecin experiments in Fig. 1 showed 38.6% survival. This experiment also included 5-aza, which showed no enhancement of the SN-38 effect (37.3% survival).

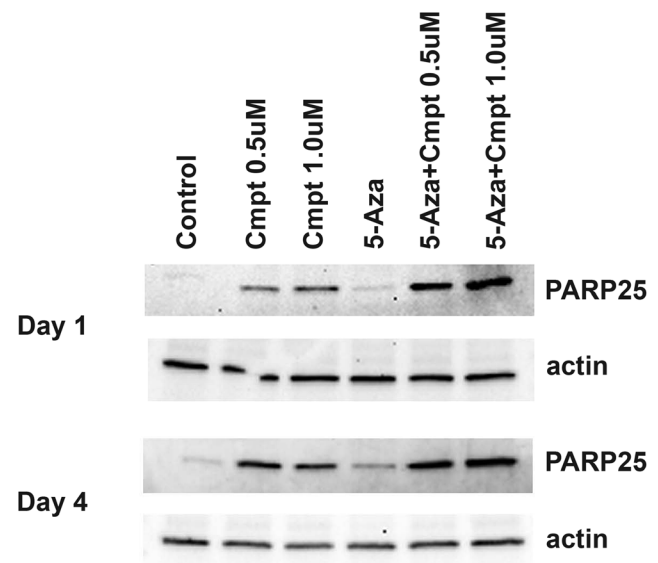
## Discussion

In this study we used primary cultures to show that human PCC/PGL are highly sensitive to camptothecin, a prototypical TOP1 inhibitor. Importantly, the representative tumors tested included three from patients with germline *SDHB* mutations, which are the most likely to metastasize [2]. All *SDHB*-mutated tumors were sensitive to camptothecin, and one such tumor was extremely sensitive, supporting a potential role for TOP1 inhibitors in treating metastases. We then demonstrated that mouse pheochromocytoma cells respond similarly, providing a

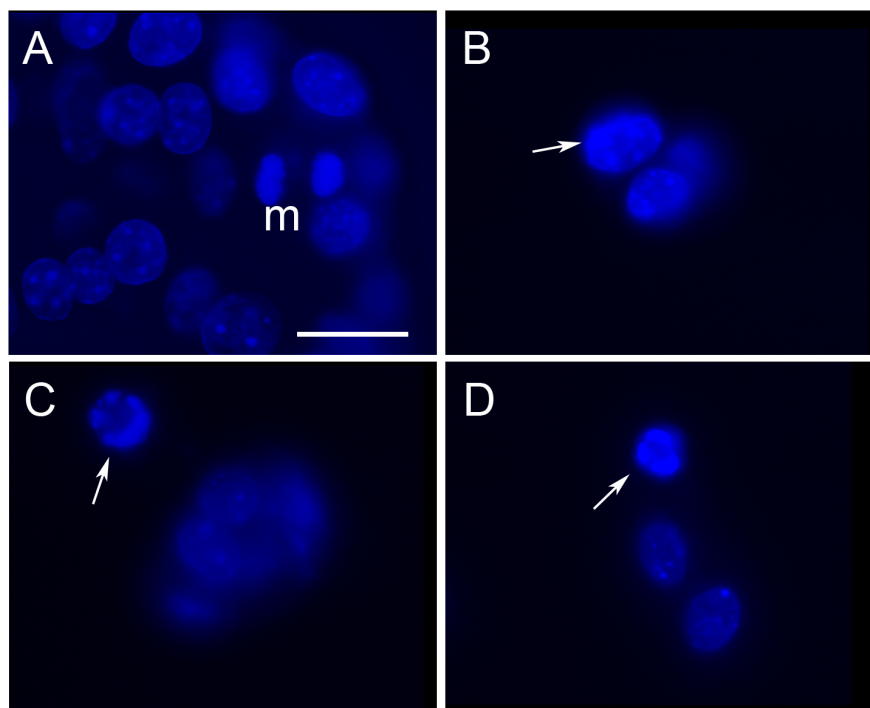


**Figure 3. Cytotoxicity of camptothecin against MPC cells is increased in the presence of 5-azacytidine.** Cytotoxicity of camptothecin against MPC 4/30/PRR cells was tested in the presence or absence of 5-azacytidine (1 uM) by XTT assay. Absorbance is proportional to cell survival. Captions under each bar indicate whether 5-aza was present during the first week/second week of a 2-week experiment. Data are from a representative experiment that was repeated on 3 independent occasions. Bars indicate mean  $\pm$  SEM of quadruplicate wells. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.g003

physiologically relevant model for further studies. Other authors have previously advocated the use of primary cultures or primary tumor xenografts for testing chemotherapy regimens in parallel with human tumor cell lines because it is recognized that even human cell lines often do not accurately reflect the properties of their parent tumors [24]. The use of mouse cells was necessary in this study because there are currently no human PCC/PGL cell lines. However, we were unable to fully rely on primary cultures



**Figure 4. Camptothecin and 5-azacytidine cooperatively increase MPC cell apoptosis.** Immunoblots show the cooperative effects of camptothecin and 5-azacytidine on MPC cell apoptosis, which is indicated by the presence of a 25 kDa fragment of PARP. A marked increase in intensity of the PARP25 band is seen at 24 hrs with the combination of camptothecin and 5-aza, with little effect of 5-aza alone. This pattern is still evident, but diminished, after 4 days. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.g004



**Figure 5. MPC cells treated with camptothecin show morphological changes of apoptosis.** Representative fluorescence micrographs showing nuclear morphology of DAPI-stained MPC cultures. Panel A shows nuclei of cells maintained in control medium for 7 days. Nuclei are round to oval with finely stippled chromatin. One mitosis is evident (m). Panels B–D show typical apoptotic changes seen at day 7 in cultures with camptothecin or camptothecin +5-aza. (B, early peripheral margination of chromatin; C, nuclear shrinkage and marked chromatin margination; D, nuclear fragmentation). In addition, B–D contain fewer cells, consistent with ongoing attrition. Bar = 20  $\mu$ m. Original magnification 100 x. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.g005

because of the rarity of PCC/PGL and the considerable difficulty of obtaining cells in sufficient number and purity from any individual tumor. It was therefore important to document that mouse pheochromocytoma cells represent in fact a valid model.

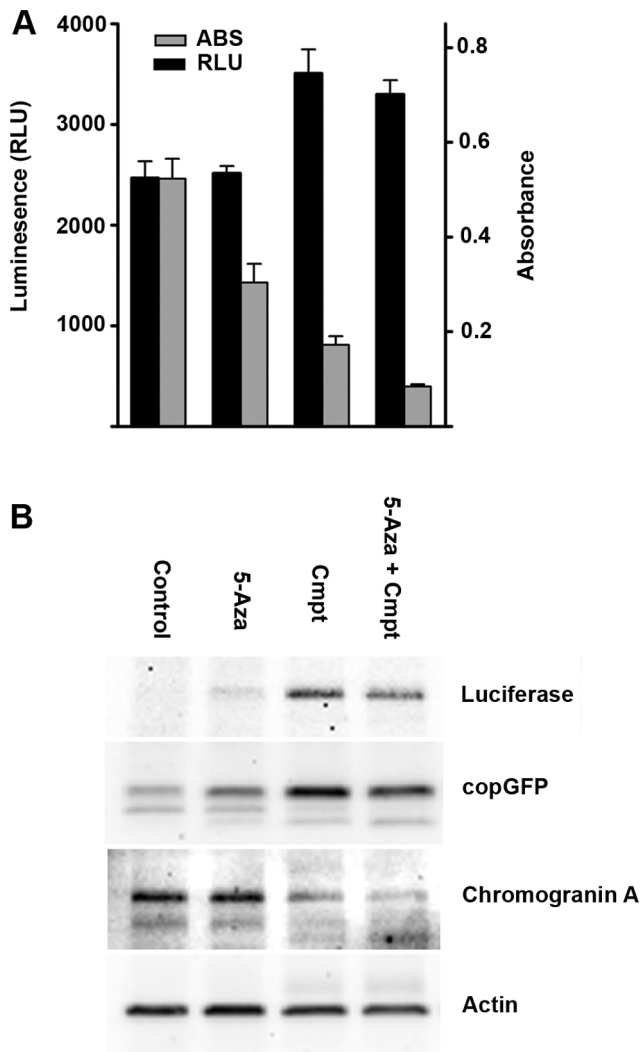
A major consideration for testing any drug on human PCC/PGL is the fact that most human PCC/PGL *in vivo* grow very slowly even when metastatic, and the vast majority of cells are non-replicating *in vivo* as well as in cell culture [3]. In this study we therefore first used human primary cultures to provide the foundation for further testing by establishing the fact that camptothecin is cytotoxic to non-replicating PCC/PGL cells. We then employed the mouse model to show that efficacy of a low concentration of camptothecin is increased by intermittent coadministration of a minimally toxic concentration of 5-aza, and that efficacy of the drugs in combination can be optimized by timing the sequence and duration of 5-aza administration. In the MPC model, the optimal effectiveness of the latter strategy was seen in a period of less than one week.

The rationale for use of 5-aza was our hypothesis that it would sensitize cells to camptothecin by its reported ability to alter transcription in both replicating and non-replicating cells [28], facilitated by dynamic DNA remodeling. [15]. However, we were unable to detect an effect of 5-aza in studies of representative non-replicating human PCC cells tested similarly to MPC. It remains possible that other relatively non-toxic drugs known to evoke large transcriptional changes in pheochromocytoma cells and in non-dividing neurons might be similarly tested. These include caffeine [29] and lithium [30]. In addition, methylation inhibitors might still play a role in the treatment of metastatic PCC/PGL because the growth of metastases is dependent on the small numbers of dividing cells that these deposits do contain. Those dividing cells

are likely to be particularly susceptible to methylation inhibitors because the tumors are often characterized by a “methylator phenotype” [31,32].

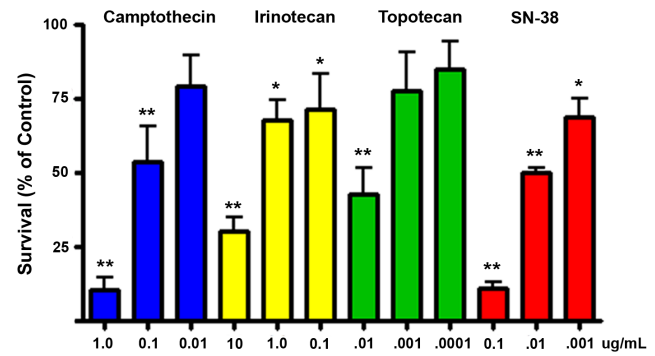
Modes of action of 5-aza in addition to effects on DNA methylation have not been ruled out in MPC cells, and methylation-independent effects of 5-aza or (DAC) on transcription have been reported in other cell types [33]. However, at the concentration tested, the relatively potent effect of 5-aza in conjunction with TOP1 inhibition versus the small effect alone at least suggest that the proapoptotic effect of the drug is strongly, if not completely, transcription dependent.

Although generally concordant effects of camptothecin in the primary human and MPC models validates the use of MPC cells to study the cytotoxicity of TOP1 inhibitors, a caveat is that the effects of low camptothecin concentrations were greater on MPC cells than on their human counterparts. This is very likely attributable to the fact that MPC cells do proliferate, increasing their sensitivity to some chemotherapy drugs. In contrast to human PCC/PGL, which showed no BrdU incorporation at the onset of cytotoxicity testing, 30% of MPC cells in this study showed BrdU labeling in 24 hours. Further, in preliminary studies we found that exposure to 5 aza at a relatively high concentration (50  $\mu$ M) for 72 hours can completely and reversibly inhibit BrdU incorporation (JF Powers and AS Tischler, unpublished data). In the present studies, inhibition of proliferation could have contributed only minimally to the cooperativity between camptothecin and the low concentration of 5-aza that we employed because a robust increase in apoptosis assayed by PARP cleavage was observed in response to the two agents within 24 hours, and markedly decreased cell numbers were detected by the XTT colorimetric assay within one week. In contrast, significantly



**Figure 6. Camptothecin paradoxically increases bioluminescence and luciferase expression.** (A) Effects of camptothecin and 5-azacytidine on bioluminescence of MPC GL-9 cells compared to survival measured by Absorbance in XTT assay at 1 week. (B) corresponding immunoblot from the same experiment showing increased levels of firefly luciferase protein and copepod GFP (copGFP) in camptothecin-treated cultures. Expression of CgA is not increased, indicating that the effect is specific for the luciferase construct. The paradoxically increased bioluminescence of cells treated with camptothecin obscured obvious actual toxicity that was quantifiable by XTT assay. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.g006

decreased cell number in cultures with 5-aza alone were detectable by XTT assay only after 1–2 weeks. Nonetheless, the inhibitory effect of a high concentration of 5-aza on MPC cell proliferation suggests a further novel strategy that could be developed in future studies. Specifically, the effect could be exploited by cyclic timing and staggering of drug administration, so that TOP inhibitors first target cells in which genes are activated during 5-aza -induced cytostasis, and additional cells are then targeted when 5-aza is removed to permit reactivation of genes controlling cell cycle progression. That approach might be applicable to treatment of metastatic PCC/PGL that show accelerated growth after failure of current chemotherapies, and would be particularly interesting to test with MTT cells. In addition, cytostasis induced by pre-treatment with high concentrations of 5-aza might cause MPC and

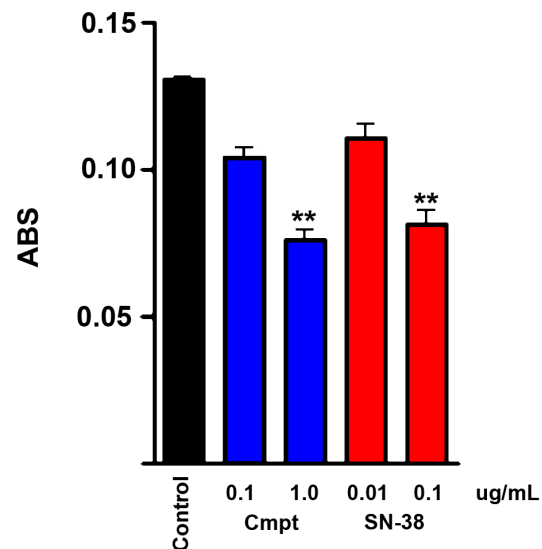


**Figure 7. Clinically utilized TOP1 inhibitors show variable toxicities to MPC cells.** Concurrent tests of camptothecin versus clinically utilized TOP1 inhibitors on MPC cells in monolayer cultures at one week. Equivalency of camptothecin and SN-38 is seen at 10-fold lower concentrations of SN38. Data are from three independent experiments, each with triplicate wells. Bars indicate mean  $\pm$  SEM. (\*\*,  $p < .01$ ; \*,  $p < .05$ ). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.g007

MTT cells to more closely resemble primary human PCC/PGL cultures, in which no tumor cells proliferate, thereby possibly increasing the relevance of both models.

Although our cytotoxicity results with human PCC/PGL cells provided proof of principle to justify further testing, cytotoxicity assays of these cells in primary cultures are challenging because the neoplastic cells can be rapidly overgrown by inevitably present fibroblasts and other cell types. The percentage of contaminating cell types varies greatly from tumor to tumor, probably reflecting variable histological characteristics of the tumor tissue [34]. The present study employed staining for a tumor cell specific marker, TH, to establish that tumor cells were being targeted. This methodology is well established but tedious, and future studies will require higher throughput methods.

Human PCC/PGL can be divided into clusters according to their gene expression profiles [35] that might in turn influence



**Figure 8. The active metabolite of irinotecan is toxic to primary human pheochromocytoma cells.** XTT assay results showing killing of human PCC cells by camptothecin and SN-38. Cultures were treated with the indicated drug concentrations for one week. Data represent mean  $\pm$  SEM of triplicate wells. (\*\*,  $p < .01$ ). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087807.g008

drug sensitivity. Tumors with *SDHB* mutations have a distinct pseudo-hypoxic signature. Because we were able to test only a small number of human tumors, we can not draw conclusions as to whether responsiveness to TOP inhibitors correlates with tumor genotype. However, a wide range of responsiveness among the three tested tumors from patients with *SDHB* mutations suggests that characteristics of individual tumors will be more important than genetic background.

A surprising finding in this study was increased expression of both luciferase and GFP in MPC GL-9 cells treated with camptothecin. This effect serves as an important reminder that chemotherapeutic agents can have unanticipated effects on gene expression. Interestingly, camptothecin has been reported to increase the expression of endogenous differentiation-related genes in cell lines derived from human hematopoietic tumors [36]. We therefore probed immunoblots for both luciferase and chromogranin A, a marker of neuroendocrine differentiation, but found that only luciferase and GFP were affected. Our experiments used a construct containing both luciferase and GFP driven by the CMV promoter. Since expression of both proteins is increased in parallel by camptothecin, the drug effect is most likely mediated by the CMV promoter.

Previous publications have called attention to increased CMV promoter-driven GFP expression in response to several drugs and other agents. Examples include 5-azacytidine [37], for which we also observed that effect, as well as histone deacetylase inhibitors, cisplatin and radiation [37,38]. These agents act with different kinetics [38], suggesting a number of possible mechanisms. However, a likely explanation for our observations is drug-mediated demethylation of CpG motifs in the CMV promoter [39]. This can occur either in response to a methylation inhibitor such as 5-azacytidine [37] or to a histone deacetylase inhibitor, which would facilitate chromatin remodeling and removal of methylated DNA [40]. Topoisomerase inhibitors might produce a

similar effect as DNA is unwound during transcription and, inversely, methylation can alter the number of cleavage sites produced in chromatin by topoisomerase inhibitors [41]. Transcriptional silencing of transgene expression by methylation has been demonstrated with a number of experimental models, and CpG-depleted DNA vectors have been tested as a tool to improve gene delivery systems [42]. Studies using luciferase constructs for that purpose have shown that CpG-containing reporter vectors are silenced by DNA methylation and that luminescence is increased by use of CpG-depleted vectors [43]. Because the CMV promoter, is widely utilized, it is important for investigators who use CMV-driven reporters for bioluminescence or fluorescence imaging studies to be aware of potential anomalous responses to TOP1 inhibitors or other drugs. In a preliminary in vivo experiment with subcutaneous MPC GL-9 cells we have found this to be a significant concern (JF Powers, unpublished data). A number of alternative approaches might be considered for optimal in vivo imaging and pre-clinical drug testing [44].

In summary, these results provide proof of principle for use of camptothecin or newer generation TOP1 inhibitors against PCC/PGL cells and suggest novel strategies for enhancing their efficacy and reducing their toxicity by optimizing both the combination and timing of their use in conjunction with other drugs. It should be borne in mind that TOP1 inhibitors and other drugs can cause anomalous increases in CMV reporter-controlled expression of luciferase and GFP, potentially confounding the interpretation of tumor imaging studies and pre-clinical drug testing.

## Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the experiments: JFP AST GGS. Performed the experiments: JFP PGK SF AG. Analyzed the data: JFP PGK GGS AST. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: SF AG KP GGS. Wrote the paper: JFP AST KP GGS.

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